

TRUE COLORS

A lot of kids in gangs don't want to be. Kenny Wheeler helps them get out and stay out.

American heroes come in all shapes and sizes. Some perform high profile, headline-grabbing feats; others go about their work quietly, rarely gaining public notice.

Kenny Wheeler, 29, is one of the latter.

He's a street gang counselor in South Central Los Angeles, one of the most murderous neighborhoods in the United States. Every night, he patrols the dangerous streets of the L.A. ghettos, trying to talk kids out of killing each other—trying to convince them that there is a better life.

"There is hope," he says. "If I didn't think so, I'd be nuts to be doing what I'm doing."

The gang problem in Los Angeles is monstrous, and it's getting worse. Last year alone, the City of Angels counted 387 gang-related deaths; half of them were innocent bystanders who literally got caught in the crossfire. Kenny Wheeler is



one of a handful of youth counselors who work for the nonprofit Community Youth Gang Services, a joint city and county anti-gang program.

He isn't a cop. He is unarmed, except for his street smarts, his unthreatening beige windbreaker, his courage, and his conviction that gang murders can be stopped. He and his partner, Jerry Anthony, patrol the streets in an unmarked car, with a two-way radio telling them where trouble is brewing.

Kenny himself has been shot, and he doesn't minimize the risks of being out on the streets. "It's dangerous, but there's a job to be done out there," he says. "My family tells me to quit all the time. I was in the middle of a gang dispute at a playground once. I was trying to cool things off when one of the gang members opened fire with a shotgun. The blast got me in the chin. It was enough to keep me on the ground for a while."

BY JIM CALIO

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID HUME KENNERLY

Kenny Wheeler comes to this work by way of East L.A., itself one of the toughest neighborhoods in the city. He is one of five children. He remembers seeing a man killed in front of his housing project when he was only five. Later, his best friend was shot to death by a local gang.

"There were gangs all around when I was a kid, but I had a strong family. Sure, there was peer pressure to join, but I overcame it. In high school I dressed like a gang member, I walked like a gang member, and I talked like a gang member. But I never actually joined a gang. Just because you look, talk, and walk like one doesn't mean you are one. It doesn't mean you're a gang member here"—Kenny taps his forehead—"or here"—Kenny points to his heart.

In high school Kenny had a teacher who was also his coach. "He always looked out for me. Maybe he saw something," Kenny says, smiling at the memory. "I remember once when I ditched school with some other guys, he called home. My parents came out and found me and brought me home with them. The other guys laughed for a week—but now some of them are junkies or in jail. It was worth the week that they humiliated and teased me."

At age 18, he was running a teen counseling center, "because kids seemed to like to talk to me." After a few years spent as a corrections officer, he joined Community Gang Services, where he is now the night supervisor.

"One of my first times out," he recalls, "I was driving with a woman who was training me. She would just plow right in—go right up to the gang members and start talking to them. I thought she was crazy. But they seemed to know her and respect her, and pretty soon I would get out of the car because she did. So what could I do? I married her."

Today, Latanya Wheeler is the day supervisor for

First there were the Bloods, who wore red. Then there was a rival gang named the Brims. Finally there were the Crips, the mortal enemies of the Bloods, who wore blue. The name Crips probably came from the original gang members' habit of walking with canes. That's the story, but who knows? Only one thing is sure: They're killing each other and anyone else who gets in their way.

The gangs wear uniforms, and have all sorts of elaborate rituals and codes. The usual outfit is khaki pants, a red or blue sweatshirt, depending on whether you're a Blood or a Crip, and hightops.

cated the gang problem enormously. As Kenny says, "A lot of these kids in gangs don't want to be there. Still, if everyone else on the block is in a gang, you join too. It's peer pressure. It's also financial. These kids just don't have any money at home. The gang is the way to do it."

Kenny goes on to explain, "If a kid sees a gang member making a couple of thousand dollars a week, sometimes more, selling drugs, it's kind of hard to convince him he should be working at McDonald's for minimum wage. On the other hand, we offer these kids their lives—the other way, they'll end up dead, in prison, or strung out."

"It's like a big puddle in Los Angeles," Kenny says, sketching a big circle with his hands. "And the police and the others are trying to dry up the puddle. But above that puddle is a big orange that's dripping and dripping. You can't dry up the puddle, so you've got to get to the kids before they get into that puddle."

He says, "It's the young kids I'm most worried about. There are two kinds. I call them the 'wannabees'—they think they want to be in a gang. Then there are the 'gonnabees'. They're going to be in a gang, they're hard-core, and they're about 12 or 13. Last year I got 60 members out

"... The gangs are like the military—some people are in for only a few years, some are lifers."

the Community Gang Services; she and Kenny have a six-year-old son.

L.A.'s gang problem started in the early 1970s, long before drug sales entered the scene and made the gangs even more murderous. Gang membership seemed to provide social identity and a sense of discipline for some kids from L.A.'s ghettos and *barrios*.

There's more: Gang members communicate with fancy hand signals. And in conversation, a Blood will never use the letter "c" because they hate the Crips so much. So they often speak in a weird kind of pidgin English. Likewise, the Crips disdain the letter "b".

The huge profits from selling drugs have compli-



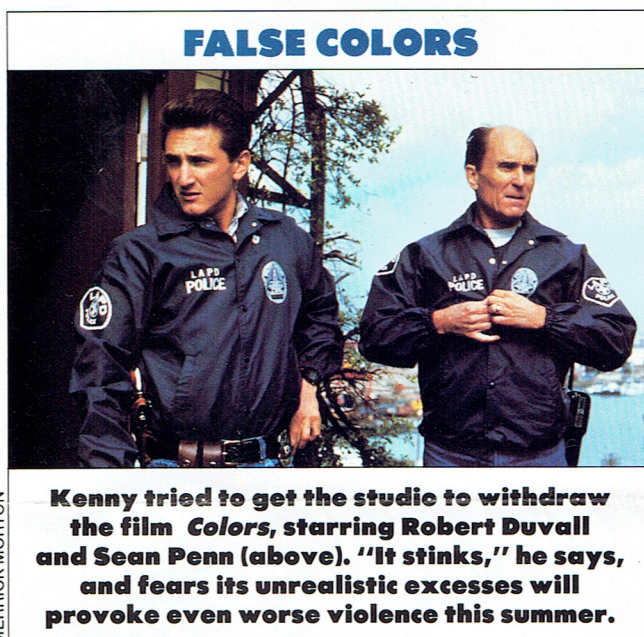
MICHAEL A. SMITH

of gangs. If you can get them out by 18, they'll be okay. It's like the military: Some guys go in for a few years and they get out. Others stay in all their lives. There's a guy in one of the gangs who's 87. *Eighty-seven*. No kidding. They just think of him as one of the boys."

Kenny's method is to talk to kids before they start fighting. "If they're talking," he says, "they don't want to fight. You've got to give them a way to save face and walk away without killing each other."

Kenny Wheeler's victories may seem small in number, but they're significant. "It gives me a lot of satisfaction. I've gotten kids jobs, and they're no longer in gangs. Once I heard a kid I was counseling singing in an arcade. I said, 'You've got a great voice. Why don't you do something with it?' He did, and about a year ago he cut his first rap record."

Kenny has gotten jobs for other kids, too. One works with the maintenance department in Pasadena. Others have city jobs, all over. "You see the big police sweeps, but you don't see all the work we do. The kids get to know us. They get to trust us. A kid might call up and say, 'Listen, man, we've got a problem down here. Why don't you come down and talk to us?' So we do. You don't see



Kenny tried to get the studio to withdraw the film *Colors*, starring Robert Duvall and Sean Penn (above). "It stinks," he says, and fears its unrealistic excesses will provoke even worse violence this summer.

MERRICK MORTON

that in the news. That gives me a lot of satisfaction, when a kid calls and says he wants to talk or he wants a job and I'm able to help him."

Kenny Wheeler and Jerry Anthony are starting out on their daily four-to-midnight patrol. Kenny drives slowly, looking down the side streets and alleys. He's wary and alert even though nobody seems to be around. "You don't see anybody now," he says, his eyes scouring an intersection, "but when it gets dark, look out. It's a battlefield. The gangs cruise up and down looking for drive-bys: they'll just drive by and shoot someone standing in a store or sitting in a car. But right now they're

home, kicking back with the homeboys, getting loaded, telling stories to each other to get their heart up. They're pressing their pants, getting ready."

As the sun begins to set and the shadows of the palm trees lengthen, you can feel the tension begin to build in the car.

"The way to kill a gang is to kill their recruitment," Kenny says. "There are 900 gangs in South Central. You've got to stop the recruitment in the school, on the playground, in the home.

"A lot of parents don't even know their kids are in gangs. We had one mother call us and say she thought maybe her kid was on drugs. Would we come

over? We searched the house and found 27 automatic weapons, some of them hidden in the couch. She had no idea her kid was involved in gangs. He was only 17."

Kenny Wheeler works the mean streets. He sees a lot of crap, and he sees a lot of sorrow. He's nobody's fool; that's why and how he survives. He knows a lot of young people will die before the killing stops.

But Kenny Wheeler is a man with a dream. He thinks about the good kids who deserve better. He thinks about his wife. And he thinks about his own son.

Maybe his son and all the other six-year-olds will have a chance, because Kenny Wheeler goes out each night and puts his life on the line for them and for the things he believes in. Typically, he understates it. Stubbing out his cigarette, still scanning the darkening streets, he says, "We're just trying to work ourselves out of a job."

"I haven't had a vacation in two years, but I'm not complaining," he says. "We're going to win this war against the gangs. It's like the FBI against the mob and all the criminals years ago. The criminals had all the guns; no one thought the FBI would win, but they did. There's hope down here. That's why I'm here." □

